
**Reviewed by** Aura Jirau Arroyo (Eastern Illinois University)

**Published on** H-Caribbean (December, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Aaron Coy Moulton (Stephen F. Austin State University)

Mirelsie Velázquez’s monograph, *Puerto Rican Chicago: Schooling the City, 1940-1977*, adopts education as a lens through which to examine the history of a minoritized community in a major US city. Through her exploration of schooling and campus activism, Velázquez explains how Puerto Ricans relied on education to meet their needs in the colonial contexts of both Puerto Rico and the US metropole. The work contributes to growing scholarship on the role of education in the development of agendas in favor of socioeconomic mobility and assertions of belonging for communities of color in the United States.[1] By focusing on a colonized population, Velázquez elucidates how citizenship and exposure to Americanization in a foreign context shaped engagement with educational authorities and city government.

The author asserts that the Puerto Rican community was aware that its claim for space in Chicago was linked to school inequalities and challenges. Chapter 1 provides background for the study. It shows that discriminatory practices in Chicago’s K-12 public schools continued processes of colonization that the United States began in Puerto Rico after the invasion in 1898. Velázquez does this by tracing the growth of the Puerto Rican community in the city during the early twentieth century and by explaining how its government initially welcomed their migration to advance economic growth. Racial attitudes in Chicago rapidly shifted perceptions on the presence of Puerto Ricans in the city, as Hispanic peoples did not fit into the city’s white-Black binary made up of Anglo-Americans, European migrants, and African Americans. Educational authorities shifted from Americanization initiatives focused on English education and civics training to more vague programming targeting Puerto Rican domestic spheres, allowing the city to continue framing the community as needing government intervention due to a lack of assimilation. Chapter 2 explains how Puerto Ricans responding by developing organizations that countered stereotypes and allowed the community to call on the city to respond to their needs from the 1950s through the mid-1960s. Velázquez traces the history of civic
groups, like Los Caballeros de Colón and Illinois’s chapter of ASPIRA, and introduces activist collectives like the Young Lords Organization throughout this exposition.

As a whole, *Puerto Rican Chicago* shows how parents criticized the city by participating in school-related institutions like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and school board meetings from the 1940s through the mid-1970s. Through the use of these institutional mechanisms, Puerto Ricans were able to organize school boycotts, advance the development of Puerto Rican-centric schools and curricula, and contribute to the radicalization of local organizations. Velázquez frames these struggles in the context of Black and Mexican American Cold War activism. She demonstrates how Puerto Ricans’ community-specific demands like bilingual education contributed to intersectional campaigns for school desegregation. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on K-12 organizing and center women’s stories as parents, teachers, and school administrators, contributing to scholarship on the role of gender in Puerto Rican social movements by noting how women in different careers held distinct positions in debates regarding educational access and urban renewal. A case in point is Velázquez’s discussion of María Cerda in chapters 2 and 3, tracing her trajectory that included an undergraduate degree from the University of Puerto Rico, migration to Chicago as an adult, and election to the city’s Board of Education. An unintended consequence of women’s early intervention in education-related struggles, the author explains, was their carrying the toll of domestic labor, work outside the home, and activist leadership simultaneously.

Velázquez’s analysis of activism in educational settings covers case studies in both K-12 and university-level contexts, elucidating how experiences of community building and engagement with school administrators informed youth activism. *Puerto Rican Chicago* argues that city schools became affected by the dominant group’s misinforma-
achieve Chicago-based community goals and Puerto Rican liberation overall. Knowing about the nature of these publications, which served as primary sources to analyze events from the 1960s through the late 1970s, would have been beneficial to explorations of community building in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

In addition, the analysis of school discrimination serving as a reminder of second-class citizenship comes across as superficial and unfitting within the larger investigation outlined throughout *Puerto Rican Chicago*. Velázquez’s unpacking of hardships faced by the Puerto Rican community in Chicago often comes accompanied by assertions that US citizenship provided privileges that other minoritized Hispanic migrant groups did not enjoy. This discussion could have benefited from additional grounding in the scholarship on the history and nature of US citizenship for Puerto Ricans, as well as clearer distinctions between the effects of racialization on their everyday lives and the ways authorities prevented the exertion of citizen rights.[2]

*Puerto Rican Chicago* sets the stage for future studies establishing concrete archipelago-diaspora connections to understand Puerto Ricans as a truly diasporic people with shared traits and experiences regardless of their dwelling. The stories of organizing in Chicago’s educational settings covered in the text provide a history of Puerto Ricans in the urban Midwest and reaffirm the centrality of schools as spaces of identity formation and radicalization for communities of color in the United States.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58661

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.